



REVIEWS

Tuazon, Bobby M. (ed.). *Oligarchic Politics: Elections and Party-List System in the Philippines*. Quezon City: Center for People Empowerment in Governance, 2007. 181 pp.

Oligarchic Politics clearly presents to us the current picture of Philippine politics as one that is elite-dominated and elite-manipulated. The major political parties are described as instruments of the landed classes and political clans to further their interests of personal aggrandizement and rent seeking. The system of elections is also marred by cheating and fraud. Though “progressive” parties rise as alternatives to these traditional politics, they fail to make an impact significant enough to overpower the current elite domination, which could be attributed to the structural limitations created by the elites themselves to maintain the status quo. The book reexamines these limitations and presents alternatives on how to transform these to become more accommodating of the interests of the marginalized few.

The book initially frames the entrenchment of elite governance as being attached to the development of Philippine institutions. Given that the establishment of political institutions is a legacy of the American colonial rule in the Philippines, American influence and manipulation had been significant in the development of elite-dominated Philippine politics. When the American government limited the electorate to propertied individuals and to those with political experience, the elites early on dominated the party system. They have since “used the party system to maintain and retain their

position in the system of governance and control of institutions” (2), thus producing elections “reflective of such a small proportion of the population” (4).

What this frame neglected, though, is the fact that elite domination in Philippine politics had already been in place since the nineteenth century, during the Spanish period. The so-called municipal elites “owning or controlling land and property in their municipalities” already “held the highest municipal offices” (Cullinane 2003, 19) like the post of *gobernadorcillo* or *capitan municipal*. Likewise, provincial and urban elites at the time also owned substantial properties and enjoyed “considerable influence . . . through their ability to exert power” (Cullinane 2003, 20). As such, elite-dominated Philippine politics merely found a continuation under American tutelage, having been in place even before they arrived.

The book’s first two chapters provide a comprehensive historical account of the periodic shifts in the pattern of party domination. It traces how the one-party-dominant politics before the Second World War transformed into having two major political parties contesting each other, reverted back into single-party domination during Marcos’s martial rule, and then emerged into a multiparty system after the first EDSA Revolution. But regardless of how many parties dominate Philippine politics, what is common is that the party-system dynamics and elections are continually marred by violence, threats, political turncoatism, and intra-party factionalism. Moreover, “dominant political clans serve as backbones of the ever-changing political machineries” (34). Given this reality plus the fact that “electoral politics and political parties in the Philippines are dominated by elite family factions” (24), the political parties in the Philippines fail to comply with what political parties are supposed to stand for: “ideological, has elements of party life, and is sustained by trust, loyalty, and discipline” (23).

Considered as the hope that could challenge the prevailing traditional elite rule within the government, the party-list system was introduced in the 1987 elections. In the book’s third chapter, Ely Manalansan tackles in detail the nature and purpose of party lists, their current disposition among voters, the performance of the elected party-list representatives, and the misfortunes they suffered from lack of political clout within the still elite-dominated legislature. He reports that “majority of the bills that the party-list representatives filed in Congress are pending” (49). At the same time, “the legislature enacted

many laws inimical to the interests of the masses” (51). Furthermore, several glitches and controversies surround the elections of party-lists, among them that party-lists getting elected even though they do not really represent any marginalized sector. Some party-lists are in fact affiliated either to the government or to a religious group. “While grassroots democracy has taken roots with the rise and preeminence of progressive party lists, shady forces of traditional politics and powerful institutions at its command ... are working in unison to frustrate, discredit and persecute progressive party-lists” (80). Thus, it is argued that “if conditions remain unchanged, the party-list system is perpetuated forever marginalized along with its marginalized constituency” (91).

More than elite domination, current limitations—like the three-seat limit, 2 percent threshold, and the 20 percent cap on membership—makes the Philippine party-list system less accessible to politically weak sectors of society. The book observes that the ideal goal of providing proportional representation is not being achieved by the Party-List System Act: representation has turned out even lower using the Panganiban formula, which uses the first party’s additional seats and its votes to compute the additional number of seats for those parties that qualified to obtain a seat. An alternative method of seat allocation, the LR-Hare formula, has been shown as more adherent to the principle of proportional representation. Using a variant of the LR-Hare formula for its seat allocation method, House Bill 6479 was filed in Congress as a substitute bill to amend the Party-List System Act. Currently pending in Congress, its approval is awaited as it will guarantee an expansion of representation of party-lists in Congress.

The book’s last three chapters take a look at the product of the elite-dominated Philippine politics: a relatively weak state characterized with having a slow-growing economy, and elections that have “failed to represent the interests of the economically and socially disadvantaged sectors of the society” (152). The country also has major institutions that are “tainted with a gross absence of credibility and whose leading occupants are motivated solely by a greed for power” (136). Its civil-society groups have problems sustaining their development efforts due to lack in manpower and material resources. More than that, these groups’ extra-parliamentary methods of challenging the elitist modes of representation often meet with brutal repression from the military. Thus, the book argues that “two decades after the restoration of formal democratic rule in 1986, the Philippines continue to face intractable problems of democratic consolidation” (150). With name recall and

entertainment remaining as the general trends of political advertising, the candidates fail in their responsibility “to take campaigns to a higher level of discussion of issues” (166). However, there’s some hope with the passage of the Local Government Code in 1991, the implementation of the Party-List Law in 1988, and the practice of Absentee Voting Law in 2004 because these provide openings for the construction of alternative political parties.

Generally, elite control of Philippine politics seems to be the main problem the book seeks to resolve; however, some parts of the book are overly focused on the lesser problem of seat allocation within the party-list system rather than the bigger problem of elite domination itself. Even if the two issues are intertwined, solving one does not automatically mean solving the other. The book discusses several reasons as to why elites remain in power: the limiting effect of electing party-list representatives, the problematic system of political parties, and the problem of corrupt and ineffective elections within the country. But it offers no solutions for these problems except that of party-list seat allocation, which is of course hardly enough to counter elite power in itself.

One of the book’s glaring weaknesses is that it fails to give standards for the biggest adjectives that it repeatedly uses. For instance, there is no operational definition of “oligarchy” even as all the chapters classify the Philippine government as “oligarchic.” It could be assumed that oligarchy is the control of the elite of the affairs of government. But since no strict definition was given for the term, the readers of the book may interpret oligarchy according to their own definition. The liberal use of the adjective “oligarchic” to describe Philippine politics could be a source of confusion as conventional wisdom has it that Philippine politics is “democratic.” Therefore the book could have discussed the thin line that separates oligarchy from democracy. Moreover, the question “when does a democracy becomes an oligarchy?” should also have been tackled, or, indeed, “can an oligarchy not become democratic at the same time?” Such clarifications could have helped convince readers that Philippine politics is truly oligarchic, as the book claims.

There is also no working definition anywhere in the entire book of who comprises the elite. With the fluidity in terms of how scholars view social classes today, such a discussion is not only important but also necessary. While the elite could be equated to the implied definition. i.e., those who are propertied and who hold public office,

other people might define “elite” differently. For some scholars, being an elite means only being a landlord, regardless of whether the person holds power in government or not. For others, holding power in government also equates to being elite. Thus, it classifies even the party-list representatives from the “progressive parties” as elites, even if their assets’ net worth is below PHP 100,000. Stricter scholars require elites to be educated, classifying them as *ilustrados*, as they were often referred to during the Spanish period. The book does little to consolidate its definition of “elites,” thus creating the impression that the different authors in the book may have been talking about different elites.

The absence of such standards thus rendered some judgments and statements by the authors of the book appear unqualified. In the third chapter, which describes Congress as “a bastion of the elite and maker of laws that marginalize the people” (51), the first question that may be asked is: when is a law harmful or not? Before offering a generalization that Congress remains a bastion of the elite, there should first be a presentation of all the laws that were passed and it must be demonstrated that majority of these do not advance the interest of the masses. Unfortunately, the book does not do this. Moreover, this does not necessarily negate the fact that good laws could have well been passed alongside with those “harmful laws.” Therefore, that bad laws outweigh the good laws should also have been established. Thus, a balanced discussion and comparison between “good” and “harmful” laws is important.

Similarly, when the achievements of the leftist party-list groups are comprehensively discussed, what the so-called traditional politicians have done should also be tackled in contrast. The book does not undertake this comparison; its authors merely assert that the representatives from the leftist parties are the only ones who have been really doing their jobs as legislators. When the authors treat it as a numbers game and justify the accomplishments of leftist parties according to how many bills they have filed, they fail to recognize that the quality of laws being authored also matters. Thus, the standard used for justifying a party’s contribution as noteworthy is debatable.

Toward the end of the book, the question on how democratic consolidation could be attained remains a puzzle. For one thing, this is because the book only finds a clear solution to the problem of limited representation of the marginalized sector. But more than that, what must be achieved to realize democratic consolidation is not

clearly identified; consequently, where to start a road map toward democratic consolidation cannot be drawn as well.

Overall, the book provides a good history of how elite rule has been embedded and why it continues to be so in Philippine politics. A significant contribution of the book is its critical examination of the current method of allocating party-list seats and its presentation and assessment of a better alternative, complete with mathematical formulas and proofs. The book would have been more significant had it provided concrete solutions to reform political parties and elections so that they do not function merely in the service of those with property or resources. The book falls short of this achievement.—**RICHARD HENRICK I. BELTRAN**, BA POLITICAL SCIENCE STUDENT, COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PHILOSOPHY, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES-DILIMAN.

REFERENCE

Cullinane, Michael. 2003. *Ilustrado politics: Filipino elite responses to American rule, 1898-1908*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Jomo KS, ed. 2006. *The Long Twentieth Century: The Great Divergence: Hegemony, Uneven Development, and Global Inequality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 262 pp.

[Note: The following review was read on the occasion of the book launching entitled “Development Economics in the Twentieth Century,” 24 July 2006 at the Balay Kalinaw, University of the Philippines-Diliman. The event was sponsored by the Third World Studies Center, Action for Economic Reforms, and the South-South Exchange Programme for Research in the History of Development.]

This is an interesting component of a study on the twentieth century led by Jomo K.S., assistant secretary-general for economic development, the United Nations. Although the title describes it ostensibly as an examination of divergence, the introduction immediately identifies the dominating effect of imperialism on economies and people. It emphasizes the continuing thrust of imperialism in the coming millennium.

The author points to the changing character of imperialism over the last century: from the overt mode of colonialism in early twentieth